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INFO RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0048
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RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA PRIORITY 1343
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: CAMBIO RADICAL: STRONGER THAN EVER

Classified By: Poltical Counselor John Creamer.
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Governing coalition party Cambio Radical made significant gains in the October 2007 local elections, emerging as the one of Colombia's four leading parties in the run up to the 2010 presidential elections. Cambio supports Uribe's "democratic security" policy, free trade, and close relations with the United States, and has been the most unified and disciplined party within the coalition. Cambio's leader, Senator German Vargas Lleras, told us he plans to run for president in 2010; he has had numerous clashes with President Uribe. Still he would not clarify whether he would oppose a possible third term for the President. END SUMMARY.

LIBERAL ROOTS

¶2. (SBU) Cambio Radical was formed in 1988 when a group led by former presidential hopeful Luis Carlos Galan decided to split from the Liberal Party to promote a comprehensive reform agenda. Galan was assassinated soon after its creation, but the party has continued to grow in strength since that time. Cambio Radical won 15 Senate seats and 20 House slots in the 2006 national elections, making it the fourth largest party behind only the Liberals, Conservatives, and the U Party. The party forms part of President Uribe's coalition. Cambio Radical has also been hit by the para-political scandal, with three of its congressman in jail and six under investigation.

CONSOLIDATING GAINS IN 2007

¶3. (U) Cambio Radical fared well in October 2007 local elections, significantly consolidating previous gains. The party secured two million more votes than in the 2003 local elections, and won four major mayoral seats and two governorships. Cambio Radical also won 49 state legislator seats and 1292 town council spots, more than tripling their 2003 result--mostly at the expense of the Liberal Party. They also made significant inroads along the highly populated

Atlantic coast, a key region for presidential elections.

COALITION STILL STRONG

¶4. (C) Cambio Radical leader and presidential hopeful Senator German Vargas Lleras told us the Party maintains a strong relationship both with its coalition partners and with the Uribe Administration. Cambio Radical spokesman in the House, Representative Angel Cabrera, told us Cambio maintains a clear advantage over the U Party, since they support Uribe and his programs, but maintain sufficient distance from the president to preserve their own identity. Cabrera told us he doubts the GOC coalition will stay united through the upcoming presidential elections, noting that Cambio Radical would not automatically back a second Uribe re-election. Cabrera and Cambio Representative Jose Fernando Castro said a new coalition could form--possibly with the Liberal Party--to support a Vargas Lleras presidential run.

PARTY FOCUS IN 2008

¶5. (C) Cambio Radical remains committed to Uribe's "democratic security" policy, free trade, and social welfare, but they are also trying to consolidate leadership positions in Congress and to build its structure in key regions. Longtime Senator Miguel Pinedo said the party continues to advocate political reform in Congress, is focused on social welfare programs, family assistance, and transportation initiatives. In addition, Cambio continues to support free trade, decentralization, and market-based economic reform. Cambio Radical Senator Nancy Patricia Gutierrez is current Senate President, and Cambio is set to take over the presidency of the House in 2008 under the coalition power-sharing deal. The Atlantic coast will be a focus of party machine building in 2008-2009--led by Barranquilla's new Cambio Mayor Alex Char.

2010: VARGAS LLERAS AND THE 3RD TERM

¶6. (C) Cambio Radical is unique among the leading parties in having already identified its presidential candidate--Vargas Lleras--for 2010. The Party remains silent on a third term for Uribe, and Vargas Lleras has not yet officially announced his candidacy. Still, Vargas Lleras told us he plans to run and enjoys the full support of his party. Pinedo told us the decision not to announce was a mistake. "I told German to announce months ago and will tell him again . . . The people of Colombia need to know there is another option to an Uribe third-term," Pinedo said. Vargas Lleras has a history of supporting strong ties with the United States, directed Cambio to support the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement, and takes a hard line against terrorism and macrotrafficking. Vargas Lleras survived two assassination attempts (reportedly by the FARC), the most recent a car bomb that went off near his armored convoy in north Bogota in October 2005; he lost several fingers on his left hand and suffered other injuries in the attempts.

¶7. (C) Vargas Lleras told us he and the party will defer taking a position on a possible third term for Uribe for as long as possible. If legislation for a constitutional change allowing a third term reaches Congress, Vargas will state his position, but only after Uribe expressly seeks congressional support for the amendment. Vargas told us the fate of a third term vote in Congress would probably lie with Cambio Radical. Under the most likely scenario, the U Party and Conservatives would support a third term, and Polo Democratico and the Liberals would oppose. This would leave Cambio in the deciding position in both chambers of Congress. Cambio would also control the presidency of one of the bodies. Pinedo and Gutierrez told us Vargas recognizes he would not be able to stand in the way of a third term if

Uribe maintained 70-80% approval ratings, but would try to make it as difficult as possible for him.

Brownfield